

St. Catherine's Academy (Dominican Convent Motherhouse
at San Rafael)
1520 Grande Avenue
San Rafael
Marin County
California

HABS
CAL
21-SANRA,
3

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Western Region
Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94107

HABS
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDING SURVEY

ST. CATHERINE'S ACADEMY / SAN RAFAEL CALIFORNIA
(Dominican Convent Motherhouse at San Rafael)

Location: 1520 Grend Avenue, San Rafael, CA 94901 Survey No. [CA-2354]

Present Owner: Sisters of St. Dominic, Congregation of the Most Holy Name

Present Use: Vacant following a fire on July 12, 1990

Significance: Considered "one of the most impressive structures in all Marin county"¹, the Dominican Convent Motherhouse is significant for its historical associations to California's settlement period, through the connection of the convent's founder, Mother Mary Groemare who arrived in Monterey, California from Paris in 1850, and established the Sisters of St. Dominic order. In time, this order would ultimately expand in size and influence resulting in its having great consequence in the history of California education. The building itself is recognized for its architectural significance as a relatively rare Victorian era, Second Empire style, monumentally-scaled institutional structure, designed by one of the best-known regional architects of the period, Thomas J. Welsh. The building's physical context, as an observable remnant of both Spanish Land Grant properties, and the later William T. Coleman Tract development, around which the town of San Rafael grew, provides unique links to the physical evolution of the town of San Rafael. Additionally, the building's setting remains largely as originally planned in the 1880s, and specimen plants of the original historic landscape abound. Sadly, due to a devastating fire in 1990, the building has sustained the loss of significant historic fabric rendering its integrity below the standards normally required to allow the building's reconstruction. According to the EIR, "Because of this loss of integrity, the Motherhouse is not eligible for listing on the National Register in its damaged condition. If reconstruction of the third and fourth floor and roof were accurately executed according to the requirements of the National Park Service, the building would again be eligible for listing."² Although there is no requirement for inclusion in the Mitigative Documentation Program under the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act, the Sisters of St. Dominic have commissioned this documentation which will be contained in the archives of their new buildings on the site of the original Motherhouse. Record documents will also be offered to the Main Library at San Rafael, and the Library of Congress HABS collection.

¹ Here Today, p.236.

² DEIR, July 26, 1993. See also Letter From SHPO dated September 7, 1993. (Appendix 1)

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: In November 1888, a construction contract was signed upon the recommendation of Father Lagen (who was the priest at the Mission San Rafael the Archangel) with a local builder. The building was completed and dedicated on July 21, 1889. Lagen's family owned a Welsh-designed home in San Francisco.

2. Architect: The building's architect was Australia-born Thomas J. Walsh (1845-1922) who as a child, immigrated to California with his parents. Following a Jesuit education and a carpentry apprenticeship, he completed an architectural apprenticeship with Kenitzer & Farquarson. The establishment of his own practice was fostered through his gregarious personality and deep connections to San Francisco's Irish Catholic community. He was for many years, the architect to the Archdiocese of San Francisco. He had a prolific and successful career of considerable importance, and was one of San Francisco's best known early architects. After 1904, he established a partnership with John W. Carey, which lasted until his death. In 1903, Walsh was replaced by Albert Pissis as the convent architect.

3. Original and subsequent owners: Throughout its entire history, the building has had only one owner, the Sisters of St. Dominic, Congregation of the Most Holy Name, who continue to own it today. However, at the time of the building's construction, they were an unincorporated entity, and therefore, unable to own property under their own name. Consequently, the property was purchased by Archbishop William Patrick Riordan whose name may be found on the original title.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: The structure was built by local San Rafael contractor James Chisolm for a contract amount of \$100,000.00. The prominent Donohue family made a gift of stained-glass windows. Other benefactors generously gave altars, statues and sacred paintings, as well as providing fine shrubs, cedars, fruit trees and olive trees for the gardens. The palm tree near the entrance first appears in photographs circa 1890.

5. A print of the rear elevation of the Motherhouse from the Welsh office has survived in the convent archives, (along with correspondence and specifications) and most of the original construction survived relatively unaltered until the fire of 1990. Those minor alterations are listed below. The building's original program was multi-purposed; it was designed to include classrooms, a parlor, dining rooms, dormitories, a novitiate, a chapel with a sacristy, and an auditorium. Also contained here were a trunk room, six bathing rooms, lavatories, toilets, and linen closets, as well as room for further expansion.

6. Alterations and editions:

- a. 1910: Kitchen structure added, attic developed.
- b. 1912: Interior remodeled; connected to St. Thomas Hall.
- c. 1930: Elevator added; interior remodeled
- d. 1951-65: Bathrooms modernized; suspended ceilings added
- e. 1976: First floor, south end subdivided for bed/bath suites
- f. 1982: Chapel restored
- g. 1990: Fire destroyed fourth floor/ severely damaged remainder.

b. Historical Context

The beauty and temperate climate of San Rafael had been recognized by Fr. Junipero Serra as he toured California evaluating sites and locations for the construction of the Franciscan Missions in the 1700s. The future site of the Dominican Convent had been a small part of the Spanish Land Grant property known as the Rancho San Pedro Santa Marguerite y Las Gallinas. It was also known as Magnolia Valley. These lands were originally developed by the mission fathers as a sanatorium for the Native-American wards of the church. In 1833, secularization resulted in the lands being placed in private ownership. By government patent, the 22,000-acre Rancho was deeded to Timothy Murphy, who was later to become Mayor of San Rafael. Murphy subdivided the property, selling a portion to Oliver Irwin, who later sold it to "the Lion of the Vigilantes" William Tell Coleman. Today the properties are still known as the "Coleman Tract" or the "Coleman Magnolia Tract," reflecting this purchase.

Following the arrival at Monterey in 1850 of the founder of the Dominican Sisters, Mother Mary Groemare, the first Dominican convent school in California was built 1851. The Sisters work was subsequently expended throughout the state by the creation of a series of parochial boarding schools for young women. The second school, St. Catherine's Academy, was built in Benicia in 1854. By 1887, the Sisters work had grown to include seven of these schools when it was decided by newly-elected sixth Prioress Provincial, Mother Louis O'Donnell to relocate the Benicia school to San Rafael. Following the acquisition of the site from Coleman, the new St. Catherine's Academy was built. Although the early correspondence refers to the building by this name, it soon became known as the "Dominican Convent at San Rafael", a name that continues in use today. Following the construction of the convent, and the nearby Rafael Hotel, the area became very prestigious as a residential community for early San Francisco millionaires. Many of the daughters of the region's most prominent families were educated here. Today, the school has evolved into the Dominican College³ of San Rafael.

³ PMAA Historic Resource Report, July 1992

Part II. Architectural Information

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character

The Motherhouse was designed as a relentlessly symmetric three-story structure with twin towers flanking a central stairway. It featured a red painted, standing seam, sheet metal mansard roof with varying shapes and sizes of dormer windows, including two "rose" windows opening onto unused attic space. Reflective of the order's french heritage, (the order was founded in the 13th Century in Toulouse) a Second Empire architectural style was chosen, but a meager budget resulted in a fairly "thin" and austere interpretation of the style. Up close, architect Welsh's "chateau" remains unconvincing in its Victorian era conceit of simulating stone detailing in wood. The minimal base, simple window trims dressed with wooden keystones and undersized cornice brackets suggest a residential scale, oddly transplanted to a monumental institutional structure, resulting in a stylistically inconsistent design.

2. Condition of fabric

"The exterior of the building was being repainted in 1990, when a torch being used to remove old paint started a fire. The building burned for approximately four hours. The fire and subsequent demolition of structurally damaged portions of the building, eliminated the roof and fourth story of the building which left the building intact up to the top of the third floor walls.

"...the most obvious result of the fire was the total loss of the fourth floor, the mansard roof, the roof structure, the attic space above the chapel and the Chapel's vaulted ceiling. Approximately ten rooms on the third floor suffered severe damage. The remainder of the third floor damage varied, but there was extensive fire, water and smoke damage throughout the floor. The first and second floor sustained smoke and water damage, including buckled flooring."⁴ The entire building is now covered by temporary roofing which has leaked extensively, increasing the amount of water damage.

B. Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions

"The Motherhouse was originally a four-story, wood-frame structure, approximately 222 feet long by 86 feet deep. It is a U-shaped building with short wings on both ends, with the long axis oriented north-south. There is a twenty foot deep, three story addition on the east side of the south wing remaining from the original passage to St. Cecilia's Court (now gone). There

⁴ DEIR, July 26, 1993

is a two-story porch which ranges from 10 to 13 feet deep on the remainder of the east side of the building. There is a one-story kitchen addition measuring 36 by 42 feet on the north side of the north wing. At the northeast corner of the building, a two-story, wood frame glass-enclosed passageway with a walkway on its roof at third-story level leads to St. Thomas Hall, providing a direct connection between the first three stories of both buildings."⁵

2. Foundations

The original foundations are unreinforced, low-fire masonry, and remain unreinforced, but intact.

3. Walls

The walls are built of rustic redwood siding, and were originally painted a pale green. Characteristic features of the walls include clear articulation at each level, classical cornice and balustrade at the base of the roof, and the use of classical ornamentation such as keystones and entablatures over windows. The front elevation is divided into a hierarchy of bays which accent the pavilion-like end wings and the ceremonial entrance stair.

4. Structural system

The structural system was conventional ballooned wood framing of the period although some very large redwood members have been uncovered within.

5. Porches

The building had two significant porches. Centered on the front elevation was a formal entrance stair leading to a colonnaded porch which provided access to the formal parlors on the second (main) level. Beneath the stair was another "front" door which provided student access to the classrooms which were at grade level. The rear elevation features two levels of sun porches with decorative railings characteristic of Victorian era architecture. This elevation has been described as resembling a Mississippi paddle-wheeled showboat.

6. Chimneys

Unlike those found in French counterparts, the chimneys of the Motherhouse were not designed as important architectural features; rather they were minimized and allowed to appear as asymmetric elements. They were built of masonry and were located as indicated on the elevation drawings accompanying this report.

7. Openings

a. Doorways and doors

⁵ DEIR, July 26, 1993

The entrance doors were of solid wood construction and carved in a variation of the french linen-fold pattern. Another simply-paneled and inconspicuous door appears on the front elevation. On the rear elevation are several types of doors. The primary ones are pairs of 15-light french doors. Larger pairs of 6-light and eight-light doors appear on the north wing. The entrance doorway is elaborately paneled and may be seen in large detail in the drawings. Other doorways are simple wooden frames.

b. Windows and shutters

Windows at the ground level of the front elevation are 1/1 double hung with wooden sills, architraves and pediments. At the other elevations on this level, they are 4/4 double hung with no decoration except for a wooden sill and frame.

At the second and third levels, the windows have keystones at the arched heads, with surrounds which have semicircular hoods at the top, scrolls at the base, and wooden sills. The front elevation windows are 1/1 double hung, while the rear elevation feature 4/4 double hung.

No shutters have ever appeared in any of the historic photographs.

8. Roof

a. Roof shape

The roof shape on the end pavilions was a classic mansard of the more common straight (as opposed to flared) variety, with a decorative curb at the bottom and moldings at the top. Pinnacles were placed at the corners, atop this curb. The roofs of these two receding wings were capped with elaborate cresting. The roof for the linear part of the structure was also a mansard shape, but had a lower profile, and was marginally concealed by the various dormers and towers.

b. Cornice, eaves

The wooden cornice and eaves were actually more characteristic of the late Italianate style, and were visually supported by a deep banding of regularly-spaced wooden brackets.

c. Dormers, cupolas, towers

The primary dormers were actually double-tiered, with the lower level featuring 3 round-topped windows surmounted by a small pair of square side-by-side windows. Each dormer surround was connected to the mansard base with symmetric scrollwork.

A symmetric pair of slim towers flank the entrance and project above the facade reaching a level equivalent to a fifth floor. These are

terminated with peaked roofs, covered with metal shingles, and support e miniature cupola cepped with a crucifix. Smeller towers are centered on the front facade, at the end of eech of the wings. These contained rose windows end were topped with hipped roofs.

C. Description of Interior

1. Floor plans

The plan may be described as a linear, double-loaded central rectangular block, terminated with a wing et each end which returns backwards forming a U-shaped plan. The center section is generally composed of simple rectangular rooms facing either the front or the rear. At each end were located the more specialized functions. For example, the north wing housed the chapel, which comprised most of the second and third floors in its two-story volume.

2. Stairways

The main stairway was located on the becksides of the center section, at the middle of the building. It was unenclosed, and served each level of the building. It was built of redwood with sturdy, carved newel posts. Minor stairways existed at each end. See floor plans.

3. Flooring

Flooring throughout the developed parts of the Motherhouse was built of solid oak strips over a redwood subfloor.

4. Wall and ceiling finish

The building made extensive use of redwood in both concealed end finish locations. Modest millwork including baseboards, chair rails picture rails and crown moldings as well as simple door and window casings were found here. The wall and ceiling finishes were painted plaster over wooden leth.

5. Openings

a. Doorways and doors

All doors and door casings were built of redwood. The doors were paneled with two small panels et the bottom, a slim horizontal panel at knob height, and two slim, tall panels at the top. Stiles were approximately 5", with a 10" base. The door casings hed cherecteristic Victorian era circular-petterned corner blocks throughout, and were finished in a dark stain. Later interior design changes found most of the door casings repainted painted in a white enamel.

b. Windows

The window framing details matched the door frames. The windows themselves were described above, in the exterior description.

6. Decorative features and trim

Due to an extremely tight construction budget, the interiors were relatively austere. However, a beautiful, if simple chapel was built, and photographs accompany this document. It featured a two-story semi-circular apse, flanked by small arched niches. Two story high columns supported a mezzanine choir loft.

7. Hardware

Hardware choices were pretty limited in 1880s California, and what is found here is characteristic of that which occurred elsewhere in northern California. These were simple bronze door handles, hinges, etc. Since the bathrooms were altered in the 1950s, nothing remains of the bathroom accessories which characterized the early Motherhouse.

8. Mechanical equipment

a. Heating, air conditioning, ventilation, lighting and plumbing.

"Among the conveniences and facilities in the original building were a dumbwaiter, speaking tubes, steam heat and a series of grilles which provided outside air exchange to the building. Over the years, numerous interior changes included the addition of a passenger elevator, alterations in partitions, installation of carpeting and composition flooring, and installation of a suspended grid ceiling in the south end of the first floor. The electrical and plumbing systems appear to be a patchwork of the original and later elements, while the original steam heat system has been altered comparatively little."⁶

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation

The Motherhouse provides a symbolic "front" to the existing school complex. Centered on a curving carriage drive, the building is oriented with its long dimension as the north-south axis, resulting in a front elevation which faces west. Over the years, its wings became connected to several buildings behind, forming an enclosed and private enclave, typical of contemplative or religious communities.

2. Historic landscape design

⁶ DEIR, July 26, 1993

"The Motherhouse was designed to proclaim the presence and the faith in the future of the Dominican Sisters. It asserts itself strongly when viewed from Grand Avenue, and acts as a backdrop to the front garden. Although this garden has an entrance path that leads axially to the ceremonial stair and front doors at the center of the Motherhouse, the majority of photographs in the Sister's archives show the Motherhouse from one end of the horseshoe-shaped drive that arched from the corner of Grand and Acacia Avenues to the stair and back to Grand and Locust Avenues. A photograph from 1897 is captioned "No front gates, entrance from the sides." Photographs taken as early as 1900 show a wooden fence running north-south, continuing the line of the east wall of the Motherhouse, and reinforcing the character of the building as a grand object (set in space), behind which, the viewer from Grand Avenue was to see nothing. Photographs taken over subsequent years show that the landscaping matured, but always treated the garden west of the Motherhouse as a foreground to the master object, and articulated the area south and east of the building quite differently.

"While the garden west of the Motherhouse was conceived as a foreground to the building, the garden behind the Motherhouse had a completely different character. Like the front garden, the east garden changed over the years, but it was more intimate, less formal and smaller in scale in each of its varying forms documented by photographs in the Sister's archives."⁷

3. Outbuildings

Eight remaining buildings on the project site are proposed for demolition. These include the 1912, Albert Pissis designed, St. Thomas Hall, and seven others. St. Thomas Hall is a three story, California Mediterranean style, unreinforced masonry building, which meets some criteria for both National Register and City of San Rafael Landmark listing, but is currently unlisted at both levels. The other buildings include a utility building, boiler house, carpentry shop, art studio, two garages, a small building used for offices and a gymnasium. These seven buildings vary considerably in size, style and detail, although they share some characteristics, such as their simple wood-frame structures with wood siding, gabled roofs and unornamented traditional materials and articulation. All seven are secondary in the architectural hierarchy of the site. Like the similar background and service buildings of the Dominican College campus, they play a limited role in the character and order of the site, serving mostly a utilitarian function and reinforcing the prominence of the primary buildings such as the Motherhouse and St. Thomas Hall.

Part III. Sources of Information

A. Early architectural drawings

The earliest architectural drawing that exists of the Motherhouse is a reproducible of the original rear elevation at a scale of 1/8" = 1'-0", bearing the lettered signature: "T. J. Welsh, Archt.", and his address: Room 95 of the Flood Building. Additional drawings, prepared by Pissis, describe portions of the Motherhouse as it was

⁷ DEIR, July 26, 1993

connected to St. Thomas Hall. Original correspondence between Mother Louis and Welsh exist in the Dominican Archives.

B. Early Views

Thanks to the elaborata and continuous archiva, which was saved from the 1990 fire, many early photographs exist. ~~A selection of these are included with this submittal, and are listed in the Appendix.~~

C. Interviews

On May 16, 1991, Patrick McGrew conducted an interview with than 88-year-old Dominican archivist Sr. Martin, to confirm materials preparad in his document entitlad: *Historic Resource Raport: Dominican Convant, Volume I, St. Catherine's Academy*. Sr. Martin anterred the Dominican Convent in 1927 and continuas symbolically as the institutional memory of tha convent. Between tha years 1965-1986, she assistad her twin, Sr. Justin with the archive; since then she has served in the capacity of senior archivist.

D. Bibliography

1. Primary and unpublshad sources

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- b. Thomas Welsh's lettat to Mother Louis, regarding paint colors for the Motharhouse; May 23, 1889. Dominican Archives.
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- d.) A Tributa from Many Hands, *The Dominicans of San Rafael*, Tha Dominican Convent, San Rafael, 1940.
- e.) Snyder, John William, *Index of California Buildings, 1879-1900*, unpublished M.A. thesis, UC/Davis, 1975, pp. 545-66 (Walsh)

2. Secondary and published sources

Books:

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_____, *From the Four Corners of the Earth Came
the First Settlers of San Rafael*, Dorothy Gardiner, May 4, 1974.

Pacific Coast Architect, *Obituary: David Ferquerson*, July 1914, p.
70.

E. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated

While it may never be possible to know everything about a particular building, it would
seem that all likely sources of research have been explored. A considerable body of
historic documentation now exists on this building.

F. Supplemental Material

1. Measured drawings, according to HABS guidelines have been prepared
by consultant Tanya Wattenberg. Her production notes are as follows:

PRODUCTION OF FINISHED DRAWINGS

COMPUTER EQUIPMENT

Hardware: Macintosh Quadra 900 Computer; Mikrotek 1850s slide
scanner.

Software: Dreems CADD package and Photoshop.

PROCEDURE FOR FINISHED DRAWINGS

The floor plans were completed by entering known measurements
according to CADD practices.

The rear elevation began with a full-size scan done on an IBM system of the existing elevation by T. J. Welsh. That scan was converted into a Macintosh format. The elevation was then completed on the Macintosh using the scan together with scaled scans of slides taken in April, 1992, measurements from completed floor plans and all other known measurements.

The remainder of the elevations were completed by utilizing scaled scans of slides taken in April 1992, information from the completed floor plans and any other known measurements.

PROCEDURE FOR UTILIZING SCALED SCANNED IMAGES TO COMPLETE ELEVATIONS.

The structure was photographed using slide film and a 35mm perspective-correction Nikon lens. Each slide was then scanned into the computer and stored in an individual file. In the program *Photoshop*, the images were enhanced, clarified, lightened/darkened, sharpened, etc., as needed. The images were then transferred into the *DreamsCADD* program and scaled proportionally along both the "X" and "Y" axes according to known measurement. Each image was then placed on a separate layer within the drawing file to be used as a "template" over which the scaled line drawing was produced by simply tracing the image. This procedure is particularly useful for drawings architectural details after they have been photographed close-up.

Because of the large size of the Dominican Motherhouse building, it had to be done in sections which were later merged together.

SOURCE OF MEASUREMENT INFORMATION FOR EACH DRAWING

FIRST FLOOR PLAN

Exterior: On-site measurements - April 1992; existing plan - July 1990.

Interior: Existing Plan - July 1990; coordinated with second floor plan on-site measurements - April 1992.

SECOND FLOOR PLAN

Exterior: Completed first floor plan; existing floor plan - July 1990; slide / photos - April 1992.

Interior: On-site measurements - April 1992.

THIRD FLOOR PLAN

Exterior: Completed second floor plan; existing floor plan - July 1990; slide/photos - April 1992.

Interior: Existing floor plan - July 1990; coordinated with completed second floor plan.

FOURTH FLOOR PLAN

Exterior: Completed third floor plan; existing floor plan - July 1990; slides / photos - April 1992.

Interior: Existing floor plan - January 1957; coordinated with completed third floor plan.

REAR ELEVATION

Horizontals: First floor exterior on-site measurements - April 1992; completed floor plans.

Vertical: Existing rear elevation by T. J. Welsh; Computer scanned and scaled slides; counting / measuring repetitive siding and elements.

FRONT AND SIDE ELEVATIONS

Horizontals: Same as rear elevation

Vertical: Computer scanned and scaled slides; coordinated with completed rear elevation; counting / measuring repetitive siding and elements.

ROOF (ALL ELEVATIONS)

Rear Elevation: Existing rear elevation by T. J. Welsh.

Front Elevation: Information compiled from rear elevation roof, old photos, and architectural engraving by T. J. Welsh reprinted from March 20, 1889 edition of the San Francisco Monitor.

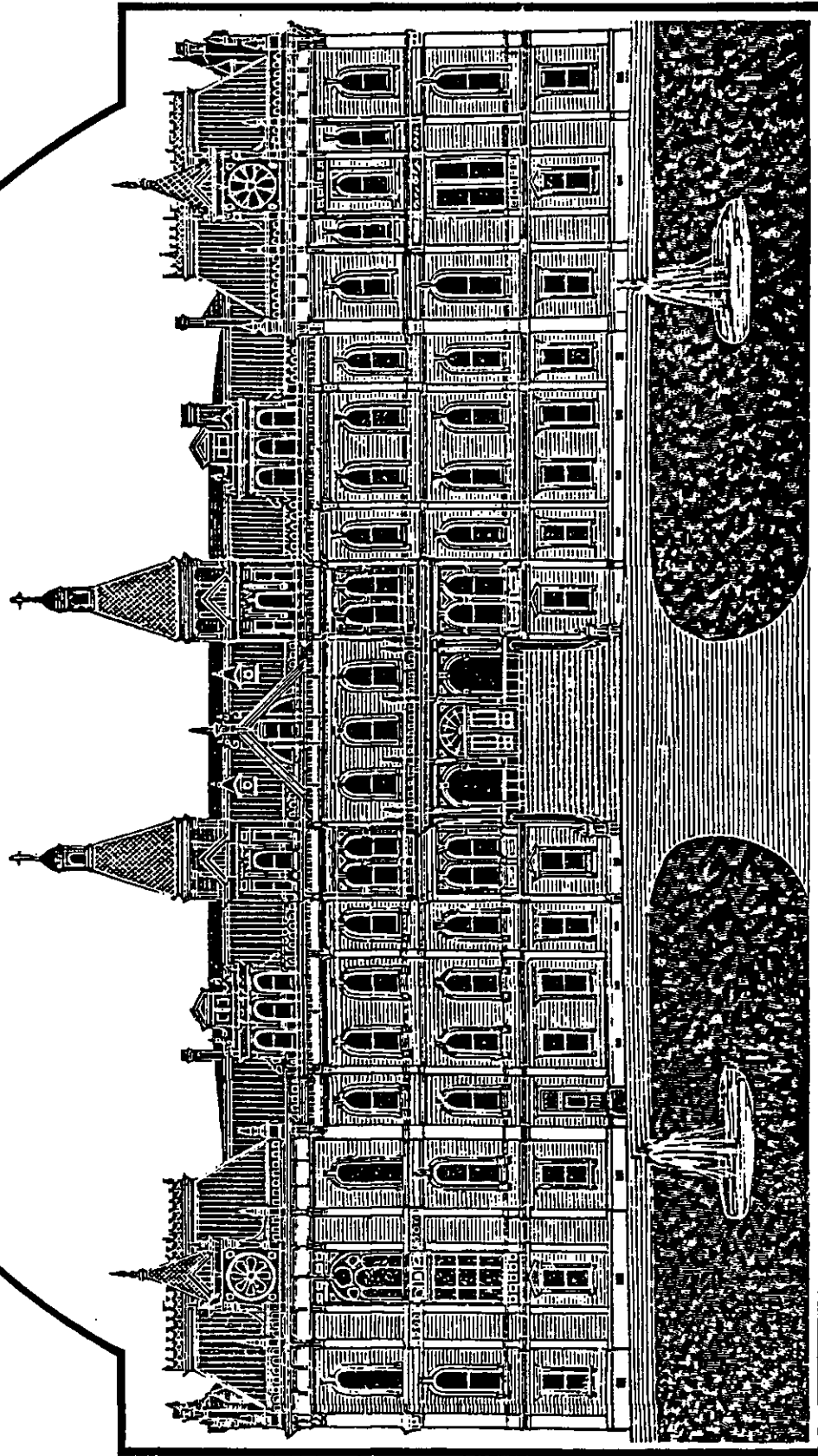
Side Elevations: Information compiled from front and rear elevation roofs and old photographs.

2. In April, 1992 on-site photography was conducted with a perspective-corrected Nikon 35 mm lens producing 68 slides which were used to assist with the measured drawings; labeled copies of the slides with plan keys indicating the direction of the image are included in this submittal.

3. Some black and white photography was also done to record post-fire condition. Prints of these photographs are also transmitted. See list in Appendix.

Pert IV. Project Information

The Sisters of St. Dominic propose to construct a new complex as part of a Master Plan for the 6.83-acre site on the east side of Grand Avenue between Locust Street and Acacie Wey in San Rafael. The assessor's parcel number is 15-142-02. The project site currently contains two major structures, the fire damaged Motherhouse and St. Thomas Hall, and seven ancillary buildings. The proposed project would require the demolition of these existing structures on the site. The existing Summer House Arbor and swimming pool will be included in the new project and will not be demolished.



*Architectural Engraving of the Motherhouse by T.J. Welsh, Architect.
Reprinted from the March 20, 1889 edition of the San Francisco Monitor.*